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A True Story of a Congo Boy

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One day a little boy named Disashi was born in a village of the Bamba, a clan of the Baluba tribe, living amid the forests and plains of the Upper Kasai District of the Belgian Congo.

The baby's father and mother were very happy to have a son, and so called a witch doctor to prepare a powerful charm to protect their child from evil spirits. The charm was then tied around the baby's waist and a goat was sacrificed to gain the favor of the spirits of their dead ancestors, who were supposed to dwell in a sacred tree near their hut.

One night when Disashi was big enough to play about the village, a leopard sprang out of the tall grass and rushed off with one of the children. The men of the village seized their weapons and followed the leopard so closely that he was forced to drop the child, but he was already dying from the wounds made by the animal's savage teeth.

Disashi's father was afraid that the leopard might return and take his child, so he went again to the witch doctor and paid him to make another charm, which he thought would make all the wild beasts afraid to catch Disashi.

One day the chief called all the leading men of the village to a council. The women and children were allowed to hear the "palaver" if they kept very quiet. Disashi crept close and heard Kasonga, a nephew of the chief, telling a story which made his blood run cold. It was about the Basanga, a fierce tribe who lived several days' journey to the east. Kasonga had

just returned from a distant village and had heard that the Basanga had been trading slaves to the Arabs, and for the slaves had obtained some wonderful weapons which discharged thunder and lightning and could kill people at a much greater distance than the best bows and arrows. It was said that the Arabs had bought these lightning sticks from another race beyond the Great Water, and that these people had white skins and straight hair, but of course no one could believe it. However, it might be true, for what ordinary people were capable of such magic as drawing the lightning from a clear sky and using it in battle!

Kasonga then told the council that he had seen a great number of villages which had been burnt, the people having all been killed and eaten or carried away as slaves. Many skeletons could be seen where the Basanga had passed with their caravans of slaves. Several clans had united to fight the cannibals, but they had no power against the magic lightning, and those who could outrun the Basanga were glad to escape without fighting at all. These fierce people had now gone back to their own country, but would return again after the next rainy season and continue their slave raids. As others rose to give still more terrible accounts of the killing and eating of people by these men with strange weapons from the unknown land beyond the Great Water, Disashi could stand it no longer and crept away to sob out his terror in his mother's arms.

Not many months after this Disashi was awakened at daybreak by his excited parents. He heard several sharp reports with an echo like thunder, then as his father collected his weapons, his mother with her little daughter, Kaphinga, in one arm and an infant at her breast, ran to hide in the long grass, hoping to escape while the men were fighting. Disashi clung to his mother as they ran. Soon they were creeping through the grass toward the forest. They could hear many reports from

the thunder sticks, and as soon as they looked back, they could see the smoke of their burning village. After a little while the shouting grew less and the sound of many footsteps came toward them. Disashi's mother knew that her husband and his friends had lost the battle and were running, as she was, to gain the protection of the forest, where some of them might escape from their pursuers. The frantic woman now stood up and began to run, but was soon overtaken by two big Basanga, who tied her hands. Disashi started to carry the baby, but one of the men dashed out the little one's brains and threatened to kill the woman if she stopped. Heart-broken, Disashi and little Kaphinga followed their mother to a group of captives who were guarded nearby, while the two men then turned and continued the pursuit of the villagers who had escaped. They had almost stumbled over several corpses, which had their heads cut off or were otherwise mutilated. Among the captives Disashi recognized his aunt, whose hands were also tied, but the children were allowed their liberty, since they would not leave their mothers. Many of the women had seen husbands or relatives killed or had infants taken grom their arms and dashed to death, so everyone was weeping. As the sun rose higher, Disashi and little Kaphinga were hungry and thirsty, but no one could give them anything and they could only cling to their helpless mother and sob themselves to sleep. In the afternoon the Basanga returned with more captives. Some of the women were released and made to prepare food for the whole company. As Disashi looked toward the camp fires of their captors he saw several corpses cut up for cooking. Horror-stricken he turned away, only to see a quantity of human flesh being dried and smoked to preserve it for future use.

The captives were then tied to a long rope and loaded with food for their captors. As they marched the children ran along with their

mothers, and when they were too exhausted to keep up, the tired women had to add them to their already heavy burdens. If any one sank from exhaustion and could not go further he was instantly killed. Often Disashi could hardly stagger along, but his mother could only carry Kaphinga, so Disashi had to walk on or he would have been killed, as others had been.

After many days of such marching they at last reached the capital of Mpania Mutomba, the King of the Basanga. Many of the captives had been killed and eaten on the journey, and now a few others were selected to be eaten at a great feast, celebrating the return of the king from another successful expedition. The other captives were then divided. Disashi's mother was given to a soldier to become his slave wife. Little Kaphinga was allowed to go with her mother until she became old enough to sell for a good price. Disashi clung to his mother and tried to follow her, but he was taken away and given to one of the favorite wives of the king. He had scarcely time to realize the sadness of his lot, for his mistress kept him very busy bringing wood and water, pounding manioc root and corn into meal, looking after the goats and chickens and doing a great deal of other work. At night when he crept into his hut he used to cry for his mother and little sister, but he was so tired that he soon fell asleep. One day a big dance was in progress in the yard enclosed by the high stockade surrounding the houses of the king. As the king looked on he enjoyed the dance very much. When the musicians, who had beaten the drum and played at the flutes at the dance were ready to go, the king looked around for a present for them. Seeing a slave child standing near, he called Disashi and gave him to the men. As they took him away, one of them said, "Let us eat the child." Another said, "Give him to me and I will give you a fat goat." The others agreed, so Disashi went away with his new master. Soon he was sold

to the people of another fierce tribe, the Batetela. Disashi could not speak their language, but saw the price paid for him—ten cakes of native salt and a quantity of black powder. This powder was what he afterwards learned was the mysterious force which he thought caused the thunder and lightning to issue from the lightning sticks, or guns.

After living with the Batetela for some months, Disashi was again sold, and this time to the Bakuba, who lived within a few days' journey of Lusambo, the capital of the Kasai District. Here Disashi was made to help in building huts and doing work usually thought to be too heavy for anyone but a man. One day he heard that a white man was coming to the village. Afraid, but curious, Disashi watched from a distance until the stranger arrived. After the white man exchanged greetings with the chief, Disashi gained sufficient courage to walk nearer and see the visitor closely. Yes, he was really white, and his hair was straight. Now he was actually eating like other people, perhaps he was more like black people than Disashi had thought. Many reasons were given for his white skin, but the one generally accepted was that the white people must live under the water a good deal of the time, like musk rats, and the effect of the water was to bleach their skin and straighten their hair.

Before leaving the village the white man began to buy rubber, and gave the chief a present of cloth, beads and brass rods. For this present the chief agreed to send a certain quantity of rubber every month to the white man's post. Disashi was now sent to the forest every day to cut rubber vines and prepare rubber for the trader. When the day came for the rubber to be carried, Disashi was given a load, with some other slaves, and sent to the rubber post, two or three days' journey away. A son of the chief went with them to collect the pay for the rubber. Soon word came from the white man

that the amount of rubber must be increased. At the end of the month if the quantity did not satisfy the trader, soldiers were sent to arrest the chief and his council, and they were put in prison until the villagers paid the ransom in rubber. All the people now had to work very hard to collect enough rubber, but as usual the brunt of everything fell on the poor slaves, and Disashi was now forced to work harder than ever. One day when he carried rubber to the white man, he saw the trader engaging some workmen. Disashi inquired of some of the work people about the conditions of their service, and decided to try it. He found that his native master would not be allowed to catch him as long as he remained in the white man's employ. After working as a laborer for some months, Disashi was given easier work as a servant in the white man's house. Once when he overslept, and came late to his work, he received fifty strokes with a "Chicotte," or whip made of hippopotamus hide, but by great care he was usually able to please the white man and avoid such terrible punishment.

At last the day came when the white man was to return to his own country, so he called all of his people and told them they could now go back to their villages. Disashi knew that his black master would try to catch him and force him back into slavery, so he decided to escape by accompanying a friend to Luebo. After arriving at Luebo he heard a bell ringing and asked about it. He was told that some white men had come with a message from the Great Spirit, and every day that they prayed to the Great Spirit and told the black people his message. Disashi asked if he might go and hear, and then his friends told him how anxious these white men were for all the black people to learn all about the Great Spirit, and that he would be very welcome at the church. After the service Disashi decided to enter the catechuman class. Later he got the job of washing clothes for some of the missionaries and was

always careful to do his work well. By studying during his spare time he was able to read all the books which had been translated into the Buluba language, and after awhile he became a teacher. By this time he was grown and married to a girl named Mehta, who was brought up in the mission home. Mehta was neat and cleanly and kept a nice home for her husband. Soon Disashi was made an evangelist and was sent to teach and preach to the Zappo-Zaps, a branch of the Basanga tribe. Later he was transferred to work among the Bimbadi, a group of slave-trading people from the Portuguese colony of Angola. Though very successful in his work and universally popular, Disashi contracted the sleeping sickness and returned to Luebo for treatment. While he was somewhat improved when I left Luebo, I fear that without the care of a doctor he will soon succumb to the disease which each year is the cause of the death of many thousands in the Kasai District alone. But Disashi has already taught hundreds of the Savior in whom he has learned to believe, and when he is called above there will be many stars in the crown which is waiting for him.